

My Life My Choice Case Study: Empowering Survivors of Child Sex Trafficking



CASE STUDY

MY LIFE MY CHOICE

ABOUT MY LIFE MY CHOICE

Based in Boston, Massachusetts, My Life My Choice (MLMC) is a survivor-led nonprofit organization fighting to end commercial sexual exploitation of children. Its services—survivor mentorship, prevention education, professional training, and advocacy and leadership development—help program participants build their social capital through peer support. MLMC is one of 12 community-based behavioral health services programs at the Boston-based Justice Resource Institute, a larger nonprofit working in partnership with community members “to [open] doors to opportunity and independence.” It has received two U.S. Department of Justice grants in the Mentoring for Child Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Domestic Sex Trafficking Initiative. MLMC is one of the oldest continually operating anti-trafficking organizations that uses a comprehensive survivor mentoring model throughout its programming.

Program Overview

All aspects of MLMC are designed by survivors of human trafficking. According to all of the interviews conducted with peer mentors, staff, and a former participant, the authenticity of survivor-led design and implementation makes MLMC most effective in reaching its goals. Working in partnership with local child welfare, health and human services, and criminal justice departments, MLMC highlights its ability to make progress by pairing each youth with a peer mentor who shares their experience of human trafficking. According to interviewees, this intimate, shared experience—typically told at the first meeting between the peer mentor and the youth—tends to create a high level of trust that is difficult to match.

MLMC serves sexually exploited youth under the age of 18. Youth are typically 13–15 years old when they are referred to the program, and they can receive services as long as they like. The program’s goal is to help young people find a path to safety and stability by helping survivors find their voices, experience unconditional love, and develop an authentic caring love for others. Work is in three categories: survivor empowerment, prevention, and training and advocacy.

This case study is part of a project on “Strengthening Human Services through Social Capital” that aims to offer insight on programs that use social capital to reduce poverty, increase employment and economic self-sufficiency, and improve child and family well-being. For more resources, visit <https://aspe.hhs.gov/how-human-services-programs-can-use-social-capital-improve-participant-well-being-and-economic-mobility>.



Survivor empowerment includes intense mentoring, which drives much of the day-to-day work to teach youth survivors self-worth, build their ability to trust others, and help them access support when they need it. Mentoring is augmented by the MLMC Leadership Corps Program, which helps young people strengthen their leadership skills in advocacy against exploitation. Mentees also receive intensive case management services to help them navigate education, career planning, health and wellness, mental health, and substance use. Finally, MLMC builds a sense of community among the youth by hosting dinners, events, and other gatherings for staff and mentees together. A prior participant relayed that these events helped her build lasting relationships with peers with whom she still connects years later.

MLMC's holistic prevention work (<https://www.mylifemychoice.org/prevention>) includes efforts to raise awareness of vulnerable youth who may be targets of commercial sexual exploitation, as well as efforts to shift policy and practice approaches to victims of sexual exploitation. The prevention program was designed by, and is co-facilitated with, survivors. The program works with girls, boys, and non-binary youth. MLMC targets the young people at highest risk of victimization and vulnerable youth in the child welfare system.

The last area of focus of MLMC programs is training and advocacy. MLMC staff train other program staff across the country that work with exploited youth, advising them on specific issues or helping them replicate the MLMC model. Staff also educate the community about human trafficking to raise awareness that informs policy and program responses that help stop exploitation. Finally, MLMC trains professionals in law enforcement, education, child protective services, and medical settings so they are better equipped to identify victims of exploitation and to provide effective services.

Social Capital and the Elements of Peer Support

“Social capital” refers to connections, networks, or relationships among people, and the value that arises from them. Evidence shows that having greater amounts social capital leads to more successful outcomes as a result of new knowledge, access to resources, emotional or financial support, and other long-lasting resources that robust and supportive networks can bring.

At MLMC, peer mentors are the cornerstone of the program's work to build social capital. MLMC's peer mentors are adults with similar lived experiences with trafficking who help young people find a path to safety and stability. Program staff refer to the peer mentors as “survivor experts.” An interviewee explained survivor experts exhibit three distinguishing traits: personal experience in human trafficking; an understanding of research and trends in support for those who have experienced human trafficking; and ongoing professional development gained by working with clinical supervisors and

coaches to build an ongoing knowledge base about the field. A program director said it was important to provide survivor expert peers with this broader body of knowledge. They are not there only to “tell their story”; rather, they are expert team members.

How Peer Supports Work

Participants are referred to MLMC primarily through the Department of Children and Families. An assessment team at MLMC reviews each case and matches the young person with a mentor. Once a young person is matched with a mentor, “They are part of the family and never cut off,” an interviewee said. The mentor's job is to “show up” for their youth. Peer mentors represent all ages, races, and ethnicities. They are typically between the ages of 23 and 60 and each is matched with about 10 mentees. As survivors progress in the program, interactions with the mentor decrease.

Mentors share their stories when they first meet each participant. Doing so typically builds trust with the participant more genuinely and quickly than a meeting involving social service providers because of this shared experience. It gives the young person an opportunity to listen as opposed to being asked questions. Peer mentors enter these initial conversations with understanding and respect rather than judgment or observation. As one peer mentor described the participants, “[They] have a right to be treated with respect. The system may not always advocate for you in a way that is respectable. I'm going to advocate with you, but my goal is for you to get your own voice and speak out for yourself.” The relationship evolves when the peer mentor takes the young person out to eat or to the movies—neutral places where the young person is not living. These neutral locations can provide greater opportunities for the peer relationship to take hold.

The system may not always advocate for you in a way that is respectable. I'm going to advocate with you, but my goal is for you to get your own voice and speak out for yourself.
– Peer Mentor

MLMC staff note that, over time, the peer mentorship can become a key relationship for the young person because it is steady, loving, and nonjudgmental. Peer mentors show up for the young person in many ways, such as going with the survivor to court, to the doctor, to school, to state child and family agency meetings, and to other community-based meetings. Unsurprisingly, a related challenge is managing the demands on peer mentors to attend numerous

meetings with the youth. This function is so popular with mentees that it can be difficult for mentors to attend all possible meetings. In addition, demand for MLMC program help has increased dramatically, putting additional pressure on the existing pool of peer mentors.

Unlike the mentoring program, peer-to-peer supports (i.e., young people supporting each other) are not a stated program feature at MLMC, but they are a recognizable feature of the group activities of the program. Participants may meet at a comfortable location such as the program office, where the group orders pizza with no agenda other than getting to know one another. One program graduate explained that the friendships she created with the other young people in the program helped sustain her into adulthood, and she often connects with these friends for continued support.

Key Outcomes and Measurements

Tracking measurable outcomes from an anti-human trafficking program is a challenge because participant stories, not quantitative data, often yield the most insights, according to staff. Nevertheless, MLMC staff strive to combine the qualitative information they learn from mentees with quantitative metrics as much as possible.

A 2019 study funded by the National Institute of Justice evaluated the effectiveness of MLMC's survivor mentoring and prevention curriculum.¹ In the survivor mentorship program, a sample of 43 youth participated in surveys and interviews over a 6- or 12-month period.²

Most notably, commercial sexual exploitation as reported by the mentee and the relevant state agency drastically decreased for youth participants. Youth were three times less likely to report having been commercially sexually exploited and four times less likely to report having participated in sexually explicit behavior. Crime perpetration decreased by 35%, arrests or police detentions decreased by 54%, and illicit drug use decreased by 30%. Changes in social behaviors were less extreme, potentially indicating that these factors may take longer to address. For example, mentees reported feeling sad and hopeless, yet youth were 1.4 times more likely to have adequate social support. Youth reported a 20% improvement in coping skills over the course of the year.

After the 2019 study was published, the program hired a full-time evaluation manager to track how peer mentors impact the lives of the mentees. Many of the same metrics noted above are being

¹ Rothman, E. F., Preis, S. R., Bright, K., Paruk, J., Bair-Merritt, M., & Farrell, A. (2020). A longitudinal evaluation of a survivor-mentor program for child survivors of sex trafficking in the United States. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 100, Article 104083. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104083>

² Survey completion rates for each question dropped off somewhat at 12 months, leaving fewer than 43 respondents.

used to measure outcomes, but interviewees emphasized that qualitative stories about how a youth's life has been transformed remain a powerful way to relay the results the program can produce.

Lessons Learned and Key Considerations for Social Capital Integration

Seven lessons learned or key considerations can be gained from the peer mentor-to-survivor and survivor peer-to-peer support aspects of MLMC. The first four center on programmatic aspects of incorporating social capital, and the last three focus on supporting the peer mentors.

Have Survivors Lead Design and Implementation

The work at MLMC is designed by survivors and survivor mentors who provide peer supports and work most closely with participants. The survivor-led design ensures authenticity and permeates all aspects of the program, which interviewees all suggested is the foundation of the program's effectiveness. It quickly fosters trust between the program and the participant.

This emphasis on survivor-led design and implementation across the organization's functions, including the new evaluation work, provides a clear understanding of the program participants' traumatic experiences. Peer mentors can assist others working with the participant who may not be survivors, such as case workers, by sharing how the participant may be thinking when the participant does not communicate those insights with others. This can be especially helpful in the early stages of a participant's involvement in the program.



Pair Peers With Mentors Intentionally and Have a Keen Focus on the Health of the Relationship

To set the relationship up for success, MLMC reviews the situation and characteristics of each new youth participant to determine which available peer mentor will make the strongest match. Staff consider shared experiences, backgrounds, race or ethnicity, and other attributes. Providing commonality between the peer mentor and the youth facilitates trust between the two individuals.

In the early stages of the relationship, peer mentors create space to listen to the youth. Then the peer mentors introduce themselves and share their stories with the youth. Storytelling is important to set a strong foundation based on shared experience. The peer mentors ensure that mentees are not placed in situations that could induce unnecessary trauma. For example, a peer mentor might make sure the youth does not have meetings with a male service provider in a small, closed space.

Have Peers Model Behaviors

Another prominent feature of MLMC's peer supports is that peer mentors serve as role models. They show younger survivors how to set boundaries and expectations in relationships. For example, the peer mentor quickly establishes the rules for the new relationship with a young person entering the program. The goal is to use the peer mentor relationship to demonstrate how youth can command respect from others in their lives by setting boundaries. One peer mentor said they set clear expectations in telling new participants that they cannot run, steal, or show disrespect. "I tell them if they respect me, I will show them the respect they deserve." Furthermore, the mentors provide tireless support and sustained presence in the young peoples' lives even when the youth push the mentor away. Mentors are relentless in their efforts to show up for the youth. These efforts convey to the youth that the mentor believes in them and is worthy of trust, eventually leading to the youth believing in themselves.

**I tell them if they respect me, I will show them the respect they deserve.
– Peer Mentor**

Be Thoughtful With Words and Language

Several interviewees from MLMC said it is critical for peers to be intentional with language and vocabulary to develop trust. For example, successful peer mentors employ terms such as "survivor" and "survivor expert." They do not use terms such as "ex-prostitute." A peer mentor explained that "shaming and blaming" language, such as describing youth as "promiscuous," "looking for attention," or "manipulative," is not appropriate. She explained



that "this is learned behavior and survival skills." Language is an important tool in creating judgment-free spaces to develop trust. Language laden with bias or personal beliefs can be barriers to effectively reaching the exploited youth.

Treat and Train Peers as Professional Staff

MLMC compensates peer mentors with salaries similar to those of professionals holding master's degrees in social work. Paying peer mentors a fair wage, ensuring career ladders for peers to advance in the organization, and paying attention to job titles signals the value and expertise of peer survivor work. Training is also a core function for staff. Peer mentors begin with 30 days of shadowing an existing mentor, and MLMC has a school reimbursement program to help staff pursue bachelor's and master's degrees.

Relieve Peers of Duties That Do Not Directly Relate to Building Relationships With Participants

A few interviewees pointed out that working in the role of peer support is an extensive undertaking and commitment. To help peers focus solely on peer support work, MLMC uses administrative or other support staff to help peers manage paperwork and compliance-based information. Doing so frees the peers to focus solely on mentoring the youth with whom they are paired.

Consider a Peer as a "Whole Person"

Some interviewees reminded us that in their work, peers often revisit their own past trauma when they engage with participants who are navigating recent or ongoing trauma. Working as a peer in this capacity can take a heavy toll. Acknowledging this heavy burden, MLMC provides vacation time as well as mental health benefits. Program leaders can attend up to 1 hour of individual or group therapy, Narcotics Anonymous, or Alcoholics Anonymous on work time each week. MLMC also encourages consistent self-care and wellness to try to help peers avoid burnout. Program leadership describe their desire to "create a place of wellness" for all staff engaged in their work.